Thomas Sowell

Where is the peace process?

Do you know what "the peace process" is?

Secretary of State George Shultz flew around the Middle East, issuing statements about "the peace process." When Israel refuses to make unilateral concessions to enemies who refuse to recognize its right to exist, it is criticized for obstructing "the peace process."

Another baby-talk phrase thrown around these days is that Israel should trade "land for peace." It sounds like a good deal. Too bad no one has offered it.

What the "land for peace" rhetoric boils down to is that Israel should first give up land and then hope for peace. In other words, Israel's enemies should be rewarded for years of intransigence by being presented with a gift, in hopes that they will act nicer in the future.

Behind all these desperate hopes is the simple fact that Americans are getting tired of seeing violent Palestinian-Israeli clashes on the 6 o'clock news every night while they are eating dinner. Therefore, American politicians are pushing for a quick fix to complex and intractable problems that have plagued the Middle East from the moment the new state of Israel was born.

The hatreds on which these problems are based go back even further, for centuries. But with an election coming up this year, U.S. politicians feel they have to "do something." Secretary Shultz may especially feel that he has to "do something" in the waning days of the Reagan administration — perhaps something to put in his memoirs to overshadow his disastrous decisions that got American Marines killed needlessly in Lebanon.

Is Israel entirely in the right in everything it has done? Human beings seldom are. But even if the Israelis were exemplary in their behavior toward the conquered people of the West Bank and elsewhere, conquerors don't win popularity contests.

The Israeli conquests of 1967 that gave them the occupied territories did not just happen. Those lands were acquired after surrounding Arab countries launched a war to annihilate Israel and lost. That land has great strategic military importance.

The fact that there are Palestinians living on land vital to Israel's security and survival is a tragedy for both Israelis and Palestinians. Attempts have been made to give the Palestinians some autonomy, but Palestinians who have tried to cooperate with the Israeli authorities have been assassinated by the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The PLO does not want autonomy any more than it wants peace. The PLO wants Israel. Baby talk will not change that bitter reality.

The tragic and inescapable fact of history is that Arabs and Jews have both lived in ancestral homes scattered throughout the Middle East, so that you cannot draw any reasonable borders for any nation in that region without depriving either or both of places where their ancestors lived for thousands of years. When the emergence of the modern state of Israel escalated animosities between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East, many Jews abandoned their ancestral homes in Arab countries and fled to Israel. Many Arabs in Israel fled to Arab countries.

The Palestinians have been tragically caught in the middle of this. Every humanitarian impulse calls out for their permanent resettlement somewhere under conditions by which they can lead normal lives. But every machination of Arab power politics aims at keeping them embittered refugees, a thorn in the side of Israel.

Under these conditions, Israel cannot trade "land for peace" because nobody else is interested in peace. Giving up militarily strategic land virtually guarantees new wars — and on worse conditions.

Scripps Howard News Service